



Noggins, ‘the nicest work of all’: traditional Irish wooden vessels for eating and drinking

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WHEN LADY CHATTERTON EXPLORED RURAL IRELAND IN THE 1830s, SHE OBSERVED how ‘some girls brought us milk in the pretty white vessels so universally used for that purpose in Kerry’.¹ The small wooden vessels that caught her eye were usually known in Ireland as noggins. Made using a variety of techniques, they were dual-purpose mugs for eating or drinking from. This paper focuses on the noggin as a hitherto neglected aspect of Ireland’s material culture (Plate 1).² Once widely used in most Irish households and institutions, these objects, like straw chairs, have become increasingly rare, with little known about who made them or how.³ Unlike ceramic vessels, they present a conservation challenge to collectors and curators as they shrink and disintegrate if allowed to get too dry.⁴ Interdisciplinary methodology has explored a wide range of aspects of these objects to place them within a broadly contextual framework. Surviving noggins in the archaeological collection of the National Museum of Ireland have been juxtaposed with other surviving examples in museums and in five private collections, and the findings then set against texts from folk life, manuscripts from the National Folklore Collection at UCD, a range of inventories, newspapers and periodicals, and evidence from art history. Consultation with Ger Buckley, master cooper at Irish Distillers Pernod Ricard in Midleton, county Cork, allowed for discoveries relating to specific tools, techniques and materials, and he also kindly reproduced several noggins in various types of wood. Modern technologies such as dental x-ray and the use of a three-dimensional XRadia machine exposed hitherto concealed, secret construction methods. The anonymous ‘noggin weaver’ is consequently emerges as a highly skilled craftsman. As a specialist woodworker, he had to compete with coopers and woodturners for a

*1 – Woven noggin of eleven oak staves of varying widths, with ash outer woven band
(shown upright and resting upside-down on slanted top of stave handle, as it would to drain)
8-13cm h, 12cm diameter at base, widening to 12.5cm at lip, ash band up to 3mm thick (collection of the author)*



2 – attr. Erskine Nicol (1825-1904), *Untitled*
c.1850, watercolour, 48 x 34 cm, unsigned
(courtesy National Library of Ireland)

This Irish milkmaid has an the iron-hooped piggin balanced on her head ring, a tap within reach, enabling her to fill the cups which hang from hooks while it is still on her head. There is a handle on the left, enabling her to remove the load without spillage.



3 – George Washington Brownlow (1835-1876),
THE SPINNING LESSON (opposite, with detail above)
1874, oil on canvas, 61 x 91 cm (courtesy Gorry Gallery)

Brownlow juxtaposes the large piggin with wooden bands (similar to Plate 10), used for milking, alongside the tiny woven noggin with a distinctly shaped stave handle, with a horn spoon and a ceramic basin of a type which eventually helped put the noggin weaver out of business.

diminishing market that was increasingly eclipsed by cheaper ceramic and metal vessels by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Dictionary definitions abound of noggins and piggins. Although there is sometimes confusion between the two words,⁵ piggin is most often used as the general umbrella term covering many wooden milk pails, and a noggin is the smallest of these piggins. The antiquary Thomas Crofton Croker helpfully described Irish wooden vessels in common use in the 1820s:

*A piggin is a wooden vessel of a cylindrical form, made of staves hooped together, with one of the staves double the length of the others, which serves for a handle. They are of various sizes, containing from a pint to two gallons, according to the uses for which they are intended. In Leinster there is a distinction made between those of the larger, and those of the smaller, size. The former are called *piggins*, the latter *noggins*. In the same province, the pewter measure answering to the English gill is called a naggin ... In the southern counties, the terms naggin and noggin are used indifferently.⁶*



The English word *noggin*, along with the introduction of English dairying methods during the Irish Tudor plantations, apparently gave rise to terms borrowed into the Irish language – *noigean*,⁷ *noigín*,⁸ or *naigín*.⁹ Today, a *naggin* (a variant of the word *noggin*) is still well known in Ireland, meaning a small bottle of spirits (a double measure), and off-licenses testify that the terms survive and vary regionally.¹⁰ So, as Croker described, the terms reflect the various fluid quantities as well as their containers.¹¹ Surviving *noggins* vary in capacity from holding about one pint to two.¹² The larger *piggins* took various forms, some with wooden lids. Their staves had stronger hoops than *noggins*, of wood or iron, suitable for carrying water or milking cows. Women carried them on their heads, using specially made head rings for comfort and balance (the National Museum has three head rings). Such women caught the admiring attention of observers, and the design variety is described in various texts and images (Plates 2, 3, 7, 10).¹³

Tracing the etymology and definition of the term *noggin* is of limited use in estimating how long the staved and bound object was produced and used in Ireland. *Noggins* can be traced to early eighteenth-century inventories, showing that they were used in the kitchens of big houses. The 1745 inventory of Barbavilla, a grand Palladian house in county Westmeath, reveals a trail of ‘3 Nogens’ that mysteriously get ‘lost’ from ‘ye kitchen’ by two female servants, are borrowed from the dairy, then finally replaced by ‘3 new Nogens bought at Mullingar’. The ‘3 Nogens Bought from ye darry’ were probably used for milk, while the ones in the kitchen had other uses, perhaps as dry measures, ladles and all-purpose scoops for preparing food, drinking and eating.¹⁴ *Piggins* also occur in inventories, and it has been suggested that both *piggins* and *noggins* may have been



4 – attr. Daniel Maclise (1806-1870), *Untitled*

n.d., pencil, pen and ink drawing
pasted into undated sketchbook
(courtesy Trinity College Dublin)

Subsequently published as 'SKETCH OF INTERIOR OF A CABIN AT FEEDING TIME' in Thomas Crofton Croker and R. Adolphus Lynch, *LEGENDS OF THE LAKES, OR SAYING AND DOINGS AT KILLARNEY, II* (London, 1829) 154

This drawing from Kerry shows a communal meal from a table-top wooden hoop. It holds 'potatoes, butter, eggs, and milk' as 'kitchen' in contrastingly hooped, staved noggins of two different sizes.

most widespread in regions that specialised in dairying. The travelling English artist G.W. Brownlow (1835-1876) delineated woven noggins in some of his Irish paintings, where they are often juxtaposed with piggins, further emphasising the importance of their use for dairy products (Plate 3).¹⁵ J.A. Disviscour's analysis of inventories of wooden tableware in early eighteenth-century Pennsylvania concluded that 'treen'¹⁶ was not only owned by poorer people, but by 'members of the lowest to the highest wealth groups', and 'ownership increased through the eighteenth century'.¹⁷ In the absence of such detailed analysis for Irish tableware (or many surviving inventories), it is tempting to draw parallels that noggins, at least, appear to have been owned not only by the rural poor, but also in the working kitchens, dairies and breweries of the Big House, for use by servants.

Archaeologists have described similarly constructed open-topped coopered vessels in more general terms simply as 'buckets', and have analysed those excavated from Irish bogs. Noggins excavated in Derry in the early 1950s had '6 oak staves, one of the staves rising above the rim to form a lug or handle. On the outside surface of the handle the letter N has been cut with a sharp instrument, perhaps the initial letter of the name of the owner of the vessel.'¹⁸ The poorest households might have shared one noggin (Plate 5) while the more fortunate probably had individual ones, perhaps of different sizes, as illustrated by Croker (Plate 4).

Few of these once commonplace wooden noggins survive, and they are rare even in museums, where examples often suffer from dehydration, and as the wood shrinks they literally fall apart. Used as drinking vessels, measures, dippers, ladles and also for eating out of, their general and frequent use in the humid environment of the thatched house helped them to hold together and stay watertight. Useful for the basic necessity of drinking water, the practice of leaving a noggin in a bucket of spring water near the farmhouse door, on the stillion,¹⁹ for anyone arriving to drink with would also have helped to keep



5 – Francis W. Topham
(1808-1877)

IRISH PEASANTS IN A COTTAGE
1844, watercolour, 24 x 32.5 cm,
signed and dated Ballycrickawn
(private collection)

Detail showing people about to share the communal meal, with a large woven noggin of buttermilk for dipping potatoes into centrally placed in the round sciob (basket) on the cooking pot. Some people held a noggin of buttermilk under one arm while eating potatoes from such a communal basket. Although Topham worked in Galway, the bed outshot seen on the right is suggestive of a location further north.



it watertight. Many references show noggins were used for drinking: ‘She saw me putting my head into a noggin of sweet-milk and she ... hit me on the head and made me drop the mouthful I had got back into the pail again.’²⁰ In farmhouses and cabins they were used to hold buttermilk (the by-product of butter-making). Numerous written descriptions, and a few nineteenth-century sketches and paintings, show they formed the centrepiece of the idiosyncratically Irish meal (Plate 5). Placed in the middle of the flat basket of steaming boiled potatoes (which was often balanced on the cooking pot), the family gathered around and each potato was dipped into the noggin of buttermilk to ‘kitchen’ or flavour it. Alternatively, a noggin was ‘held between the left arm and the side’ when a basket of potatoes was used in lieu of a table.²¹ The noggin served equally well for porridge, stirabout (a weaker mix of oats and liquid) or any sort of food or drink. A tale of a mason’s son from the 1930s relates how ‘Wan mornin’ Gobán was atin’ his stirabout out of a noggin and a wooden spoon he med hisel’, when hersel’ let out a shout.’²²

Analysing different examples of noggins, most of the woven ones show a distinct tapering at the lip (the uppermost edges) of the staves. This ergonomic feature enabled it to pour cleanly, and was comfortable to drink from. Others, most often the heavier ones made by coopers with their encircling iron hoops, sometimes had a lip that was not tapered but might have been more robust when used as a scoop or ladle. Careful measurement of about twenty examples of staved noggins showed they all have a conical form, being subtly narrower at the base. Piggins are also conical, but most converge towards the top instead. According to Ger Buckley, this is an essential aspect of the construction process because as the hoops are tapped onto the staves, this convergence helps tighten them (Plates 2, 3, 7, 10). Some noggins were made oval (in plan) rather than circular, adding yet more complexity. Some noggins were used as scoops, and those that became worn or were no longer watertight must have found a new use as scoops, hence ‘She went over to the box to take out a noggin of meal.’²³ The lighter weight ash-hooped noggins were probably used more by infants, weak patients, or frail or elderly people (Plate 12) than the much heavier cooper hooped ones.²⁴ The latter would have cost more, as metal was more expensive than wood or a craftsman’s time, but were bound to last longer even after years of scouring and scrubbing.

The range of noggin types reflected their diverse use. The word even slipped revealingly into general use as a derogatory term: ‘what number was painted on your noggin when you were in the workhouse?’²⁵ To ‘take a stave out of someone’s noggin’ meant to give someone less to eat, or curb their behaviour.²⁶ The archaeologist A. McL. May recalled a witticism about a person rapidly gaining weight, the only remedy being ‘to take a stave out of their noggin’.²⁷ Such universal functionalism created demand from craftspeople to compete in terms of price and design (especially at fairs or markets, renowned for conviviality). Surviving examples display three main types of construction, each with their own pros and cons of weight, balance, durability, price and perhaps least important, aesthetics (Plates 6, 10). Those used in pubs, prisons or workhouses had to withstand hard use, being ‘knocked about like a borrowed noggin among a when of tin-



6 – Three noggins, each of contrasting construction

(courtesy Jimmy Moore)

A – oak with eight staves, two hooped in iron (max h: 16.5cm, to rim: 11.4cm, diam at base 13.7cm, diam at rim: 14cm, inset base set unusually high: 15-16mm) / B – woven noggin with thirteen oak staves and seven ash fingers with V-shaped divisions, ‘fingers’ overlapping from the left, very smooth and worn, base rounded with use, distinctly oval in plan, tapered to mouth for drinking, bought in county Meath (15cm h, diam at base: 15.5cm, diam at rim: 15.8cm) / C – lathe-turned, probably willow noggin turned from one piece (max h: 17.5cm, rim h: 11.4cm, diam: 12.7cm)

kers’.²⁸ The heaviest, yet most robust were those made by the coopers or cask makers, whose work was characterised by oak staves bound with hoops, usually of iron. The most highly skilled of woodworkers, coopers trained for seven years. ‘Wet’ coopers made closed barrels for liquids, ‘dry’ coopers made provision casks for holding meat, flour or butter, while the ‘white’ cooper provided the farmer with dairy churns, piggins (Plates 2, 3, 7-A, 10, 11), noggins and tubs for feeding animals, for washing and fetching water from the well. They used straight or curved staves of the best quarter-sawn oak for casks, and some of the most difficult work was making oval vessels and dash churns, which involved joining a lower broad body with a neck that sometimes flared outwards at an angle. These had to withstand rough use and stay watertight; sometimes a bulrush was inserted to help keep such joints water tight.²⁹ Cooper-made noggins would have been the most robust. They have at least two hoops of metal, and weigh heavily in the hand (Plates 6-A, 7-C, 7-E). Because they included metal, they would have cost more to make than



7 – Collection of four noggins and a piggin
(collection courtesy Victor Mee, Cloverhill, county Cavan)

A – oak-staved piggin with traces of white paint, two unmatched hoops, splayed top, base of two joined pieces (max h: 28.5cm, to rim: 21 cm, diam at base: 22cm, diam at rim: 25cm) / B – oak eight-staved ash-woven noggin with five woven ‘fingers’ (max h: 13cm, to rim: 8 cm, diam 12.7cm; compare position of weave (i.e. on opposite side to Plates 1 and 7-D) / C – silver painted oak twelve-staved noggin, original iron hoops (max h: 16cm, to rim: 10cm, diam at base: 13cm, diam at rim: 14cm) / D – palest oak seven-staved ash woven noggin, with four elongated V-shaped fingers part worn from scrubbing (max h: 16.5cm, to rim: 10.2cm, diam at base: 14.3-14.6cm, diam at rim: 14.6cm) / E – oak nine-staved iron-hooped noggin with later graining/painting (max h: 17.2cm, to rim: 11cm, diam at base: 13.6cm, diam at rim: 14cm)

other types. According to Hugh Dorian describing rural Donegal in the early nineteenth century, ‘tobacco, soap, salt, iron and leather could not be done without, but each of these commodities was used as sparingly as possible.’³⁰ The durability of iron-bound noggins probably made them appropriate for use in pubs, prisons and workhouses, but unless the hoops were painted they needed regular attention to prevent them from going rusty. Presumably it was this type noticed by John Millington Synge (1871-1909) when he described ‘tiny wooden barrels that are still much used in the place of earthenware’ on the Aran Islands around the turn of the twentieth century.³¹

Another, far lighter type of noggin was made on a pole-lathe by a woodturner (Plate 6-C). Such ‘Hollow turning done on the shortest notice’, as advertised by William Kelly, a Dublin shopkeeper in 1808,³² was quick to produce. Using green (unseasoned) timber, it resulted in the most slender, delicate design of noggin. Most of the surviving

turned examples have small vertical splits, showing how wood tends to shrink unevenly over time when things are made from a single piece and start to dry out. When a turned noggin was regularly used and kept in the relatively humid farmhouse environment, it would have been less prone to split. However desirable the simply turned noggins were, light in weight and probably lower in cost, their inherent fragility may have deterred some customers. Its shape shows how the turner closely followed the pattern of the cooper's design in the way the tall handle copies those of the staved types (compare C and A, Plate 6).

The third type of noggin is described by geographer and archaeologist Emyr Estyn Evans. He analysed rural Irish trades from the 1940s, and concluded that

the nicest work of all was done by the noggin weavers who fashioned the thin bands which held the staves of the noggins together; this work was not undertaken by the coopers. The bands were made of ash, the wood being beetled after soaking in water.³³

Soaking, probably in hot water, would render the ash more pliable, while beetling (pounding with a wooden mallet-type implement) helped to bend and stretch it. Master cooper Ger Buckley suggests that using ash from a tree's branch rather than from the trunk would also provide more flexibility and strength on a tight curve;³⁴ subsequently it would shrink and tighten as it dried. The resulting woven noggin was nearly as lightweight as the woodturner's work, yet more durable as it still incorporated oak staves.

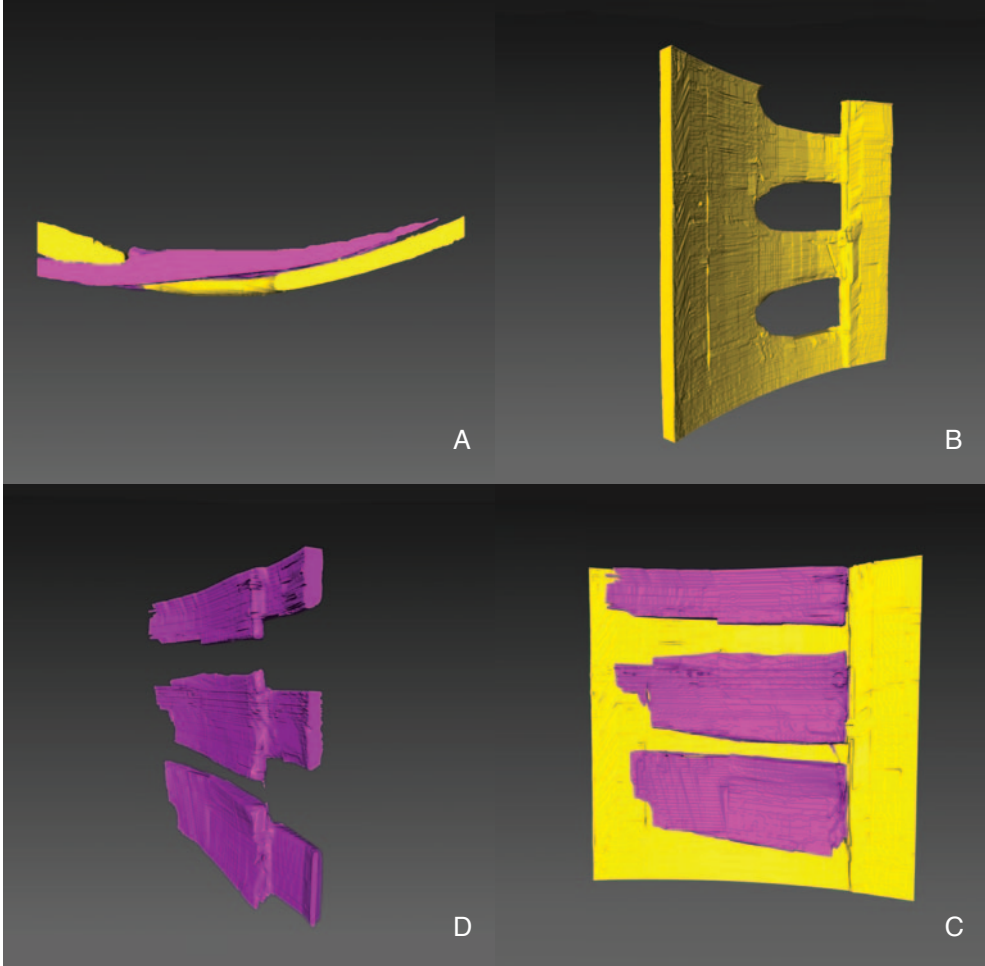
The University of Limerick's high-



8 – Noggin, with detail below (at actual size) showing interlocking of ash band.

The area where XRadia focused on 2½ 'fingers' tapering in from the right is outlined (purple areas of Plates 9A, C, D)





9 – XRadia images of noggin
(courtesy University of Limerick)

A – XRadia plan section of assembled woven noggin (Plate 8, detail) from above
A step is cut inside each ‘finger’ (purple) which, once inserted, locks it into the D-slot (yellow). Both sections taper, creating a smooth low outer profile.

B – XRadia elevation of inside of D-slots with fingers not shown (shot inside Plate 8).
Note distinct step cut vertically across the grain on the right, ready to catch and hold the edges of each ‘finger’. On the outside of this ridge, a slope was cut enabling the ‘fingers’ to keep a low profile.

C – Assemblage viewed from inside the noggin showing ‘fingers’ (purple) that with heat and moisture were made flexible and spread out twice the width of the D-slots (yellow), sideways, locking it together (compare to 9B, unassembled)

D – Inside view of 2½ ‘fingers’
showing how each has a half lap or ledge cut to catch and hold, as well as spade edges to spread out and catch once inserted into the narrower D-slots.

specification 3D x-ray microscope (XRadia XRM500) was utilised for the first time for an early wooden artefact. The high-contrast, high-resolution images revealed clearly the hidden construction inside the woven noggin.³⁵ Previously the naked eye could see that the end of the *c.*3mm-thick ash band continued around the full width of the noggin for several inches; its upper and lower edges were visible tapering gradually alongside the oak staves, at the rim and foot of the noggin (coloured yellow Plates 9A, 9C). The XRadia images show how the outermost part of the band (delineated in Plate 8 and purple in Plates 9A, 9C, 9D) curves inwards, ending with five spade-shaped 'fingers' separated neatly by four U shapes. Michael Byrne of UL focused the XRadia on a 3cm square containing two-and-a-half of these interlocking fingers, and, over three hours, shot images from every angle – from above, from within, and into the centre of the weave from the outside. The resulting squared-off images were colour contrasted for clarity (Plates 9A-D). Before soaking and beetling (hammering) the 55cm-long band of thin ash, the weaver prepared one end (here yellow), reducing its 3mm thickness to a feather-edged taper along 10cm. Then he cut small holes, each the shape of an elongated capital letter D (Plate 9B), into which five tapered spade-shaped fingers (purple Plate 9D) were squeezed to lock in (Plates 9A, 9C). Distinct tiny ledges cut into the thickness and width of the ash, and minutely slanting or curved edges on the approach to the five D-shaped holes (Plate 9B), allowed these pre-softened fingers to be squeezed into the holes (Plates 9A, 9C) and, once inserted, to be carefully spread out widthways, presumably with some fingertip manipulation (Plate 9C). The glueless arrowhead one-way interlock then dried, cooled and shrank around the oak staves. The slopes, shoulders and tapers that the weaver cut into the ash before assembly (probably with a knife) were far more complex than observed using dental x-ray or by looking at damaged, worn noggins. The cunningly prepared ash band held the ten oak staves firmly together and watertight, and the subtle shaping of its ends allowed the interwoven parts to lie beautifully flat, avoiding any sudden kinks that might have made the ash crack or wear unevenly (Plate 9A). Unlike comparable structures such as Shaker swallow-tail boxes, the interlocking pieces were hidden, so the technique stayed secret, following in the time-honoured tradition of so many woodworking trades which strived to survive by avoiding competition. Indeed, keeping the master coopers' secrets was one of the many conditions of the nineteenth-century Dublin Coopers' apprentice indentures.³⁶ Further practical experimentation may help determine how few tools were needed to make the woven noggin, but he would have needed a whittling knife (or possibly some kind of small fretsaw) and a cabinet scraper or, its substitute, a piece of glass.³⁷ Forming the staves would also have required an axe, a hammer, dividers, a croze to cut the groove for the head, and a scoop for subsequent tapering of the inner lip.

Other surviving staved examples are of the fourth structural type – a variation on the theme of a wide ash band, but using several narrower, thicker wooden bands instead. At least one noggin, and a larger piggin (National Museum of Ireland), is bound with sets of thicker individual bands, each with a single interlock (Plates 3, 10). The internal lock of the band is likely to use a similar set of ledges, as found in the noggin in Plate 1, and

since the band has greater thickness, steaming was probably used to create and hold the bend (which was a technique well known to chair-makers who required bent elements for curved backs). These thicker single bands would have been robust enough to use outside for milking a cow, yet less expensive and lighter than iron hoops. When used to bind a noggin they may have been easier to make than a full-width ash band, and more durable, but heavier. Knowledge of these various techniques, which did not use glue (animal glue would anyway have melted in contact with liquids), enables people nowadays to reproduce these objects during green woodworking courses, or to conserve them sensitively, as well as to recognise them when they appear in pictures (Plates 2, 3, 5, 11, 12).

An anonymous writer in the 1870s wrote admiringly of the noggin weaver's craft 'as the exercise of invention or genius-the noggins of one generation being the exact facsimile of the noggins of another'. This is indicative of a secretive craft passed down through the generations, along with the minimum number of necessary tools. Described as a 'drinking vessel of quart measure or thereabout ... the diminutive staves fitted edge to edge compactly, so that no liquor could ooze through; and they were kept in their place by the hoop or hoops or binders ingeniously dovetailed together, the dovetailing fancifully ornamented'.³⁸ Made entirely of 'white sally' [willow]; no other wood could, in the noggin weaver's estimate, cling so closely when used as noggin staves', and according to the housewife 'no other known timber could be scoured to such virgin whiteness as could be the noggin made of white sally.' He recalled the trade as one that had already disappeared, remembering his boyhood when 'a row of snow white noggins was to be ranged along the edge of every "dresser" shelf' and when 'no decent woman of the house ever faced home from a fair without two, maybe four, white sally noggins hung by her garter round her neck.'³⁹

In Donegal 'a maker of noggins; [was] called a weaver because the hooping of a well turned-out noggin was artistically finished. It was a broad band, the full depth of the vessel and cleverly woven together at the junction.'⁴⁰ It seems that in the 1870s, the high level of craftsmanship was taken for granted as 'the noggin weaver was so called deprecatingly, as expressive of the non-enterprising character of the occupation', presumably because he specialised in noggins and didn't aspire to making anything more valuable.⁴¹ In the 1850s, the trade of the noggin weaver was described by one writer to be 'considered a low and disreputable one and the term "Noggin Weaver" is frequently applied in derision to a bad cooper, who in general, looks upon it as an almost mortal affront ... the noggin weavers are, or frequently were, at least a peripatetic class, though not always so: and in point of respectability, ranked very little above the tinker. Unlike the latter, however, they were not sufficiently distinct and isolated from society to render intermarriages with each other necessary.'⁴² Such craftspeople frequently remain anonymous, so noggin makers such as Peter Kelly (on trial for debt in Monaghan in 1821) and John Cronin (remembered in Tipperary in 1940), are uniquely known by name.⁴³ Institutions such as orphanages, poor houses and prisons used noggins (where they were safer and more durable than glass), and in Dublin in the 1830s each inmate, on admission, was issued with a card 'with the number of his noggin thereon'.⁴⁴ Small portable items such as noggins,



*10 – Staved oak piggin, of conical form, for milk or water, with three thick ash bands each with a hidden single interlock, from Tuam, county Galway.
(courtesy National Museum of Ireland (F1932:56) and Cork Butter Museum)*

c.20-30cm h, c.25.5cm diameter at base, widening to 28cm at rim. Shrinkage has caused the central band to move. Noggins were also made using this identical technique with individual wide bands, on a smaller scale (see also Plate 3). Thicker wooden hoops cost less than metal, but were sturdier than those with a single thin band.

essential for food and drink, would have been carried by emigrants, such as orphan boys who were being sent abroad to be apprenticed to farmers, together with specific numbers of ‘brogues, noggins, trenchers, small and large tooth combs, etc’ in 1827.⁴⁵

Surviving examples show that noggin weavers employed slight variations in construction. The number of fingers that interlocked varied between examples (from three to about eleven), as did the shape of the gaps between the so-called fingers: some were V-shaped (Plate 7-D) rather than U-shaped (Plate 8), or even decoratively shaped like an ogee arch (Plate 5-B). The shapes of the hidden interlocks probably also varied between regions and makers. Study of Irish Viking cooperage reveals a range of intricate solutions for closure of various hooped fastenings. Some of them include arrowhead shapes and complex ledged internal rebates which, once assembled, stayed tightly interlocked.⁴⁶ Some look closely similar to those surviving in private collections. Research into objects in the National Museum’s archaeological collection bears out Evans’s statement that the making of noggins is an ancient craft of prehistoric origins.⁴⁷ Earwood’s impressive

archaeological study illustrates many Irish wooden as well as metal-hooped staved vessels with inset bases, showing that the techniques were long established here.⁴⁸

An account from the 1940s discusses how noggins were ‘plentiful in olden times, and you’d see an odd one of them yet ... Some of them I saw had little wooden hoops on them, and more of them had none...’⁴⁹ The latter presumably referred to lathe-turned noggins (Plate 6-C), which, along with woven ones, would have been safe and lightweight for use by children as well as by the frail or elderly (Plates 4, 12)

The demand for these dual-purpose vessels must have been substantial before the advent of inexpensive earthenware, creamware, delft and tinware. Probably offered for sale at the farmhouse door by pedlars, they were also sold in shops and markets. Joseph Peacock’s painting *The Patron* (1813) of the fair at Glendalough shows noggins displayed beside a heap of cooper’s vessels in the lower right-hand corner (Plate 11).⁵⁰ Piggins, butter churns, wash tubs and, smallest of all, noggins are depicted by the artist being sold out of a wide basket, guarded by the cooper’s dog. Few accounts have emerged yet of the elusive noggin maker. An otherwise light-hearted tale of abduction from 1835 relates how ‘Nick Nowlam, a poor noggin weaver, set off with his sack of noggins tied by a hay rope about his middle, to thry an’ sell them at a great fair.’⁵¹ It must have been with a sense of excited anticipation that such craftspeople gathered to sell what they had laboured long to make, and noggins were important at the fairs, often held over several days, where entertainment centred on eating and drinking.

The woodworkers’ contrasting techniques influenced each noggin’s design, as did the uses it was put to. Staved and bound noggins had to be thickest at the head (as the bottom was called), to accommodate the groove holding a disc of oak which formed the slightly raised base. Where some noggins had finely tapered, smooth top lips to the staves, they were thicker where adjacent to the raised stave handle to provide strength (Plates 1, 6-B, 8). For good grip (between thumb and forefinger), the handle was usually narrowed, then splayed out at the top, with a distinctive inward sloping facet cut on the inner edge (Plates 6, 8). After cleaning and rinsing, this sloped chamfer enabled it to be placed firmly upside-down to drain and dry cleanly (Plates 6-8). Object analysis supports this theory, together with a very small detail from a wood engraving, showing noggins positioned this way on a dresser (see Plate 13).⁵² Woodworkers smoothed every surface to allow the vessel to remain untainted in use. Made without measuring implements, the staves usually varied in width, and incorporated from seven up to about a dozen staves per noggin. Description of rural cooper’s ware from early twentieth-century Limerick mentions how, for carrying water or for use in the dairy, wooden vessels were preferred as ‘the tin of the bucket taints the milk’ (Plate 10).⁵³ Some woods were chosen for use with food as they were considered antimicrobial. In England, turned wooden vessels were ‘made chiefly of sycamore as this wood does not affect the colour or taste of food’ and could be ‘scoured as white as driftwood’.⁵⁴ A proverbial saying evokes the hard tasks of motherhood: ‘She has more than two noggins to wash’ used to be said ‘when an eighteenth or nineteenth child is born’.⁵⁵ The saying gains significance as each oak noggin ‘had to be scrubbed



11 – Joseph Peacock (c.1783-1837)

THE PATRON (THE FESTIVAL OF SAINT KEVIN AT THE SEVEN CHURCHES, GLENDALOUGH)

1813, oil on panel, 86.4 x 137.8 cm (courtesy National Museums Northern Ireland, collection Ulster Museum)

Detail showing amongst a huge gathering a cooper (in blue coat) selling a wide range of his wares, including (from right to left) hooped piggins, butter churns, wash tubs and, to the far left above the dog's paws, some noggins in a wide basket.





12 – J. Lizzie Cloud (fl. 1870-80),
THE CONNEMARA POSTMAN, 1878

Detail of kitchen interior with an old woman holding a woven noggin by its long stave in her left hand, and a small boy dressed as a girl, as was customary.

opposite

13 – Henry Vizetelly (1820-1894),
NED M'KEOWN'S KITCHEN

5.8 x 10 cm, engraving from W. Carleton, TRAITS & STORIES OF THE IRISH PEASANTRY (1824)

Far left shows hooped noggins displayed upside down, resting on their specially slanted stave handles on the 'white and well-scoured dresser'.

twice after use' with food, as recalled in county Donegal.⁵⁶

Any vessels used for milk had to be kept meticulously clean. A writer from 1940s Meath described coopers' noggins with

little iron hoops and they'd be polished up like silver and the wood of them scrubbed white as snow with sand. People got sand from Ardbraccan to scour the Noggins, tables, wooden house buckets, wooden churns and other wooden articles. No brushes were used that time nor no paint on the vessels and Ardbraccan people sold the silver sand – the white quarry (Ardbraccan) sand was the best for the purpose: it was lovely and white and as fine – in Navan where people bought it and came round the country selling it, a little bag of fine sand. They'd give you a 'halfpurt' or a pennyworth...⁵⁷

Fine sand scoured effectively without scratching. In mid-eighteenth-century Dublin, travelling milkmen damaged the road surface of the North Strand by using gravel 'to clean their churns'.⁵⁸ The use of salt water presumably helped this scouring process. In the 1940s in Leitrim, children were sent out to find 'redish' coloured freestone so 'all the wood articles used be scoured as bright as a shilling'.⁵⁹ Many surviving old examples show a distinct concavity between the hoops, and the normally coarse oak grain is smooth, which is evidence of repeated scouring.

As recently as the 1950s, Professor Evans related how 'cheap Delph has now replaced the noggin, but the word survives in a phrase I have heard applied to a child who is thriving on his food, "he wants a stave out of his noggin"'.⁶⁰ The once ubiquitous noggin now emerges from obscurity as the smallest wooden object of accomplished complex construction in the repertoire of Irish vernacular furniture. Now rare, but once more



widespread and commonly used than the iconic kitchen dresser built to display it, the diminutive noggin is of greater antiquity, reaching back to prehistoric times. Within Ireland's material culture, it emerges as an object of distinction. Finally, a saying, from both Leitrim and Wexford, reflected material economy and survival. When someone in a good job died there was 'a noggin and spoon for someone else'.⁶¹

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ENDNOTES

The following abbreviation is used:

NFC(S) University College Dublin, National Folklore Collection (The Schools Collection)

- ¹ Lady G. Chatterton, *Rambles in the South of Ireland* (London, 1839) 281.
- ² This research began as a public illustrated lecture given as part of the author's Moore Institute Visiting Research Fellowship, NUI, Galway, 22nd April 2015, 'Irish Country Furniture 1700-1950, Piggins, Noggins & Hens Indoors'. Coming into possession of a woven noggin (a present from Nicholas Loughnan of Loughnan Antiques, Youghal) opened up entirely new avenues of interdisciplinary research for the author, as described in this article.
- ³ C. Kinmonth, *Irish Country Furniture 1700-1950* (New Haven and London, 1993), 63-88, 195, 197-98, 239-40, figs 83-92. The straw chair or paper cup are equivalents to the noggin, being widespread, fragile and hard to research contextually in future.
- ⁴ Private collectors who keep noggins in a shaded garden shed or unheated barn have the correct approach as the noggins remain hydrated. Surfaces are wiped periodically to deter moulds. In contrast, some museum stores are overheated, and have noggins with staves falling apart so they can no longer be photographed or exhibited. Some have balls of tissue paper in the centre to prop up the staves. Lighting in display cases can cause similar problems. Rehydration is difficult and can damage surface patina. Archaeological departments that immerse staved vessels in polyethylene glycol are using a technique that is irreversible and of questionable value. The traditional thatched farmhouse was comparatively damp, and when noggins were in regular use they remained in good condition.
- ⁵ T.P. Dolan, *A Dictionary of Hiberno-English, The Irish Use of English* (Dublin, 1999) 183, 198. Also M. Boydell, 'The Origins of the Glass Piggin', *Irish Arts Review*, vol. 3, no. 3, Autumn 1986, 22. The author thanks Sarah Foster for drawing her attention to this discussion of piggins (and noggins) in glass and silver, and with different interpretation of the word piggin/noggin.
- ⁶ T. Crofton Croker, *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* (London, 1825) 210, 147.
- ⁷ W.W. Skeat, *A Concise Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (Oxford, 1882; 1983) 350.
- ⁸ P.S. Dinneen, *An Irish-English Dictionary* (Dublin, 1904) 520, 'in Con. ... holding nearly a quart.'
- ⁹ T. De Bhaldraithe, *English-Irish Dictionary* (Dublin, 1959) 477.
- ¹⁰ While in Galway, the author discussed the term 'naggin' with off-license owners, who said the term was still commonly used (with some regional variations) for a 200ml bottle of spirits.
- ¹¹ C.I. Macafee (ed.), *The Concise Ulster Dictionary* (Oxford, 1996) 236.
- ¹² D. Feenan and L. Kennedy, 'Weights and measures of the major food commodities in early nineteenth-century Ireland: a regional perspective', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature, vol. 102c, no. 2, 2002, 21-45, shows how vague measurement was. NFC, MS vol. 691, Co. Tipperary (12.2.1940) 293, 'John Cronin was a noggin-maker. The noggin held about a pint. It was made with locked staves and had a high handle out of it.'
- ¹³ For example, T. Crofton Croker and R. Adolphus Lynch, *Legends of the Lakes, or Sayings and Doings at Killarney*, vol. 2 (London, 1829) 120. A. O'Dowd, *Straw, Hay and Rushes in Irish Folk Tradition* (Irish Academic Press, 2015) 367-72. See also C. Kinmonth's 'note' for Whyte's auction, 17th September 2007, lot 106. NFC, MS vol. 1669, S. Kilkenny & S. Carlow (19.3.1959) 8; MS vol. 1669, Sherkin Island, Co. Cork (27.04.1959), Questionnaire: Methods of Transport, 'Both men & women [carry things on the head?], e.g. pail of water, creels of butter.'
- ¹⁴ R. ffolliott, 'The furnishings of a Palladian House in 1742-3, Barbavilla, Co. Westmeath', *The Irish*

- Ancestor*, 2, 1979, 87-88.
- ¹⁵ For other examples of noggins included in Brownlow's work, see C. Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art* (New Haven and London, 2006) figs. 58, 105; also 40, 46, 53, 54, 55, 175, 247. As information emerges about regional characteristics of such vessels, one can then differentiate between, for example, the locations of Brownlow's Irish versus Scottish interiors, which feature noggins or the equivalent Scottish 'luggies' or porringers. The latter often had striped staves interlocked by tinkers using an intricate 'feathering' technique (not necessarily unique to Scotland, as there are two in the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum). These sometimes had double 'bottoms' enclosing peas or stones which could be rattled noisily; see, for example, I.F. Grant, *Highland Folk Ways* (London and New York, 1975) 180-82, figs 26, 27. Some Irish methers also incorporated a double bottom (or head); see T.J. Tenison, 'On Methers and Other Ancient Drinking Vessels', *The Journal of the Kilkenny & South-East of Ireland Archaeological Society*, New Series, vol. 3, no. 1, 1860, 55, 58.
- ¹⁶ Treen (meaning 'of the tree'), collectively small wooden items; see Edward H. Pinto, *Treen and Other Wooden Bygones: an encyclopaedia and social history* (London, 1969) 3-4. He defines treen at some length, with no 'object larger than, say, a spinning wheel ... the miscellanea of small wooden objects in daily domestic and farm use...'
- ¹⁷ J.A. Disviscour, unpublished MA thesis, 'Treen in Chester County, Pennsylvania, 1683-1787: a contextual analysis', University of Delaware, 1991, 57-60.
- ¹⁸ A. McL. May, 'Some Wooden Utensils from Co. Londonderry', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, 13, 1950, 76-78. The noggin described in this article as incised with 'N' is similar in size to Plate 1, and, from examining the line drawing, is apparently made with a single broad outer band, using the noggin weaver's technique. May also describes another slightly larger noggin inscribed with the letters IM in the same place: '(the Irish word for butter) ... Some of the older folk remember when noggins were in general use, each member of the household having their own.'
- ¹⁹ A cool place near the door for the water bucket that was carried in from the spring was known as the stillion. Often made of stone, it was a recess or a ledge. See Kinmonth, *Irish Country Furniture*, 30, 132-34, figs 204-06.
- ²⁰ Seumus MacManus, *In Chimney Corners, Merry Tales of Irish Folk-lore* (New York, 1899) 28.
- ²¹ Anon, 'Peter Nipple the noggin weaver or Diamond Cut Diamond, An Irish Character', *The Nation*, 7th October 1854, 58.
- ²² P. MacGréine, 'A Longford Miscellany', *Bealoideas*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1930, 261. Also see B. Kiely, 'The Core of Colum's Ireland', *The Irish Monthly*, vol. 77, no. 916, October 1949, 450, referring to whiskey in a noggin '(...whiskey was cheap then). He filled the first quart into a noggin and mixed oaten meal with it. Made porridge of it and ate it with a spoon.'
- ²³ F. McPolin, 'A Folk Tale from Co Down', *Béaloideas*, vol. 13, no. 1/2, June-December 1943, 272-75.
- ²⁴ Kinmonth, *Irish Rural Interiors in Art*, fig. 247.
- ²⁵ M. Traynor, *The English Dialect Dictionary of Donegal* (Dublin, 1953) 197-98.
- ²⁶ Macafee (ed.), *Concise Ulster Dictionary*, 236.
- ²⁷ May, 'Some Wooden Utensils from Co. Londonderry', 76-78.
- ²⁸ Traynor, *English Dialect Dictionary of Donegal*, 197-98.
- ²⁹ C. McGlinchey, 'Childhood Memories from North Inishowen', in J. Mac Laughlin (ed.), *Donegal, the Making of a Northern County* (Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2007) 297.
- ³⁰ H Dorian (eds B. Mac Suibhne and D. Dickson), *The Outer Edge of Ulster: a memoir of social life in nineteenth-century Donegal* ([1890] Dublin, 2000) 211.
- ³¹ J.M. Synge, *The Aran Islands* (Dublin, 1907) 18. He visited annually from 1898 to 1902.
- ³² Advertisement in *Dublin Evening Post*, 28th July 1808, unpaginated, 'William Kelly, No.2, Bridge

- foot Street, near Thomas Street, has for sale the following articles ... Hair, Silk, Wire, and Wooden Sieves and Riddles, 3000 Wooden bowls, 3000 Wooden Trenchers, 3000 White Hoops ... Churns, Tubs, Buckets, Noggins. The above articles are made of the best materials...'
- ³³ E. Estyn Evans, 'Gleanings from Co. Cavan', *Ulster Folklife*, vol. 26, 1945, 2.
- ³⁴ This theory arose during the author's many discussions and practical experimentation with Ger Buckley about materials, tools and techniques used for noggin-making, during winter 2015-16.
- ³⁵ The Ulster Folk and Transport Museum have about fourteen noggins in their stored collection. Some are woven, one is an assembled ash band without staves, so the inside of the weave is visible. The National Museum of Ireland also has some in its collection, as does the Ulster American Folk Park, county Tyrone, the Manx Museum, Isle of Man, and the Pinto Collection, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.
- ³⁶ The Coopers Society of the City of Dublin, Boy's Indenture of 1st May 1884. The author thanks Pernod Ricard/Jameson Distillery Archive, Midelton, county Cork, for providing access to this and other nineteenth-century coopers' indentures.
- ³⁷ NFC, MS vol. 1173, Athea, Co. Limerick (11.11.1952) 101, has an account of a cooper who used glass on his staves, as well as using willow which he grew himself 'below on the bank of the river'. He had an implement for opening the rods and 'twas the handiest you ever saw'. Willow bindings were recently observed on piggins made during the past two-hundred years, and interwoven in the same technique as used in Viking-age cooperage.
- ³⁸ The writer would not necessarily have known that they were not conventional 'dovetails'.
- ³⁹ 'St. Malachi's Well', *Frank Leslie's Pleasant Hours*, 23 (New York, 1878) 468-69.
- ⁴⁰ Manuscripts of H.C. Hart, MRIA, Carrablagh, quoted in Traynor, *English Dialect Dictionary of Donegal*, 198.
- ⁴¹ 'St. Malachi's Well', 468-71.
- ⁴² Anon, 'Peter Nipple the noggin weaver', 58.
- ⁴³ Supplement to *The Dublin Weekly Register*, vol. 4, 1st December 1821, 'Peter Kelly, late of Sacrinion, noggin-maker', unpaginated. NFC, MS vol.691, Co. Tipperary (12.21940), 293.
- ⁴⁴ *Dublin Evening Post*, 17th November 1832. *Dublin Morning Register*, 3rd May and 27th October 1842. *Saunders's News-Letter & Daily Advertiser*, 21st April 1819, advertisement requesting 'Proposals for supplying the gaols of Newgate, Sheriffs' Prison, and Richmond Penitentiary ... until Michaelmas Term next, with Bread, potatoes, coals, straw, buckets, brooms, oil, blankets, soap, glazing, tables, forms, beds, trenchers, spoons, noggins, baskets, meal and oaten meal, and whitewashing all the prisons...' *Freeman's Journal*, 13th September 1849.
- ⁴⁵ *Dublin Evening Post*, 21st August 1827.
- ⁴⁶ M.G. Comey, *Coopers and Coopering in Viking Age Dublin, National Museum of Ireland Medieval Dublin Excavations 1962-81*, series B, vol. 10, 2010, 64-76, figs. 53, 57, type 6. Animal glue, which dissolves with heat or water (and needed fuel to heat it), would have been inappropriate for vessels frequently immersed in water, although it was sometimes used for larger furniture.
- ⁴⁷ For example, see card index drawing of NMI.1957;132, small 9 staved 'keg' 'with two encircling bands of very thin strips of wood', 'base appears to be of one piece enscribed into rebate nr base' found in Boora Bog containing bog butter, Garrycastle, county Offaly, object disintegrated, now in Swords since 08/12/2011. More research should be done into archaeological examples.
- ⁴⁸ C. Earwood, *Domestic Wooden Artefacts in Britain and Ireland from Neolithic to Viking Times* (University of Exeter Press, 1993) 76-91, 180-83.
- ⁴⁹ NFC, MS vol. 1176, 1949, 130-31.
- ⁵⁰ Joseph Peacock, *The Patron, or the Festival of St Kevin at the Seven Churches, Glendalough* (1813,

oil, 86.4 x 137.8 cm), Ulster Museum, cat. no. BELUM.U120.

- ⁵¹ M'C., 'Old Frank and his stories: Nick Nowlam the noggin weaver', *Dublin Penny Journal*, vol. 4, no. 176, 14th November 1835, 154-56.
- ⁵² There is a parallel here with the subsequent display of basins (as bowls were widely known) on Irish dressers that were traditionally arranged upside down, or 'whammeled' against each other and angled on their sides, to display while reducing dust; Kinmonth, *Irish Country Furniture*, figs. 143, 145-46, 167; pp.101-02, 205.
- ⁵³ NFC, MS vol. 1173, Athea, Co. Limerick, c.1950, 106.
- ⁵⁴ A. Jobson, *Household Country Crafts* (London, 1953) 13 and fig. 37.
- ⁵⁵ Dolan, *Dictionary of Hiberno-English*, 183.
- ⁵⁶ NFCS (The Schools Collection), MS vol. 1028, 66, 69, informant Mrs L. Slevin (54) collector Noel Rocks both Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal, c.1936.
- ⁵⁷ NFC, MS vol. 580, Cannistown, Navan, 1949, 72.
- ⁵⁸ *Pue's Occurrences*, 4th November 1755, quoted in W. Laffan (ed.), *The Cries of Dublin, drawn from The Life by Hugh Douglas Hamilton, 1760* (Dublin, 2003) 130.
- ⁵⁹ NFC, MS vol. 844, Barony Mohill, Cloone, Co. Leitrim, 14th May 1942, 33. This account details noggins used for drinking out of on the dresser (display of which is detailed), with 'three small hoops which kept the staves firmly together', 32.
- ⁶⁰ E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Folk Ways* (Dundalk, 1959) 75.
- ⁶¹ NFCS, MS vol. 591/2, S. Wexford (1938), 36; MS vol. 0191, 18 Teacher Muris Mac Gearailt, Buckode, Co. Leitrim, no date (c.1930s).

